

TURTLE EFFIGY PIPES WERE IMPORTANT SYMBOLIC ARTIFACTS IN THE LATE PREHISTORIC WORLD

by
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The author has previously written about three dimensional pipes depicting various animals. Most were crafted during the Late Prehistoric Period. These pipes were recorded as being used as ritual devices to convey pleadings to certain protective spiritual entities. The smoke from the burning materials in the pipes served to transmit messages to certain influential spirits in other worlds believed to provide for one's needs. Wafting fumes from smoking an intoxicating tobacco elixir facilitated the ritual. The mood affecting smoking material produced the required hypnotic mental state for the desired interaction.

The selection of effigies for the various pipes was especially significant. Aquatic animals said to be emissaries from the mysterious dark world below the earth's surface were often the chosen models for pipes. These lower world beings were also believed to be in control of unpredictable influences and certain evil forces. In addition some of the lower world inhabitants such as frogs mysteriously transformed during their lives. Part of sharing the natural environment was the necessary act of ritually witnessing these animals. Obtaining their influence was believed to impact one's health and continued tranquil existence.

In their living forms lower world animals also had more mundane roles as food sources. Some such as turtles also provided valuable raw materials for artifacts. One could assume these resources were deemed necessary and appropriate given the amount of their ritual veneration.

The so-called lower world food resources including the mostly aquatic family of turtles resided mostly in the many streams, rivers and other wetland environments of the Late Prehistoric Period, circa 1000 to 1500AD. Turtle meat and turtle gruel/stew were likely exploited delicacies. Snare traps could be set to capture the turtles at points of their egress along stream banks. Some turtles could even be captured by hand. Abandoned or exhausted turtle shells became ready-made appliances for many utilitarian purposes. As water or food containers or simply storage devices the resilient turtle shells became a common utensil in many communities. The shells of the land-based Eastern Box Turtles were particularly popular choices for containers. Because of their value and common occurrence it's ironic that turtles were rarely chosen as models for ritual materials such as pipes.

When viewing prehistoric animal carvings such as turtles it always becomes a challenge to identify the species of the animal being portrayed. Primitive artisans had an affinity for sculptures with limited anatomical

features. Many examples also have exaggerated features that belie their true identities. Turtle pipes like other effigy pipes often feature some abstract details especially when carved in the round. Like the other animals the types of turtles are therefore hard to discern based on their limited and/or modified sculptural forms. Artisans who created the carvings apparently didn't need to accurately model specific species of turtles to enhance their ritual value. This circumstance doesn't always apply to the turtle's head, which is usually more accurately portrayed.

Because of their varied decorative variations most turtle effigy pipes are portrayed in a representational manner. Most are intriguing-looking sculptures.

The following is a pictorial display of some turtle effigy and turtle motif pipe specimens from several late period cultural groups. They are quite varied in terms of their forms and features.

Starting clockwise at the top (12 o'clock) in photo 1, are four turtle pipe specimens. The first example is a well executed standing turtle pipe (species undetermined) made of chocolate brown sandstone. It measures about 6" by 3". Significant details include the turtle's appendages carved in an offset manner into the sides of the body, a tapered head with incised eye markings and a dominant mouth depiction carved at each side of a v-shaped nose feature. The turtle's tail is depicted in a pinned down offset manner at the rear of the pipe. A series of deeply cut parallel abrading grooves are excavated into the pipe's base. Their exact meaning is subject to speculation. They may signify a type of specimen tattooing or ritual registration. Or they may have resulted from sharpening other artifacts.

The pipe has an upwardly angled stem cavity entering from the rear. The bowl opening is shown on the top. It was found in 1944 near a bridge construction site south of Mt. Vernon in Knox County, Ohio and is a Fort Ancient culture product.

The specimen at the right (3 o'clock in the photo) is a very large well sculpted pipe that was found adjacent to Lindley Creek in Polk County, Missouri. The shell portion of this cream-colored limestone turtle is heavily engraved in a complicated lined format. Features include the turtle's well executed front and rear appendages and a folded tail. The turtle's head seems undersized in relation to the body and shell but is highly detailed. Its facial details seem almost human-like in their presentation. They include rounded eyes and eyelids located at the front of the face.

Other prominent features are a broad nose with nostrils and an undercut mouth with

lips. All of these adornments are sculpted on a slightly tapered flattened head. The flanged stem and bowl cavities are undersized in relation to the shell and body. The decorative elements do not indicate the identity of the species of turtle. The pipe's dimensions are 7" by almost 6". It is a Middle Mississippian Period artifact.

At the bottom (approximately 6 o'clock) is a simplistically decorated possible turtle pipe specimen from Scioto County, Ohio. Oval in form with the bowl at the top and stem opening at a right angle it has only engraved lines on its surface suggesting a turtle. Figured are a series of blocked off lines indicative of a turtle shell. A circular depression on the bottom might be a ritual identifier or indicate a use as a nut processing tool. Except for the surface decorations this specimen resembles other Fort Ancient pipes found in the southern Ohio River region. It is carved out of local sandstone and measures 3" by 2".

The final example also from Scioto County, Ohio is one of the more uniquely configured specimens among effigy pipes from Ohio. Although this Fort Ancient Culture pipe is quite detailed some engraved patterns on the shell portion are deeply engraved in an atypical manner. A flanged stem opening enters at the side of the effigy rather than at the rear as would be expected for this type of pipe. This rarely seen motif likely resulted from the artist's desire to emphasize the turtle's tail. It is executed in a boblike fashion within a deeply engraved tapered rim feature beneath the overhanging turtle shell. The turtle shell decorations consist of outwardly naring lines in a sectioned format emanating from the bowl cavity and its flanged motif. The decorations are supported by a row of oversized engraved circles on both sides of the shell feature. The turtle's head is detailed, tapered at the sides with circular eyes and a long deeply cut mouth sculpted below a snout-like nose with small circular nostrils. The circular designs on the shell might suggest an immature Eastern Box Turtle effigy. This pipe measuring 6-1/2" by 3-3/4", is crafted from very fine grained Waverly sandstone. As indicated it is one of the most uniquely crafted specimens among Fort Ancient effigy pipes.

Photos 2, 3 and 4 show the three most representative turtle pipes in more detail. They rank among the most individualistic sculptures among animal carvings.

In relation to other pre-Columbian effigies turtles were rarely crafted as effigy pipes or other modeled talismans. Perhaps turtles' solitary and seemingly docile habits and secretive nature contributed to their limited use for sculptures.

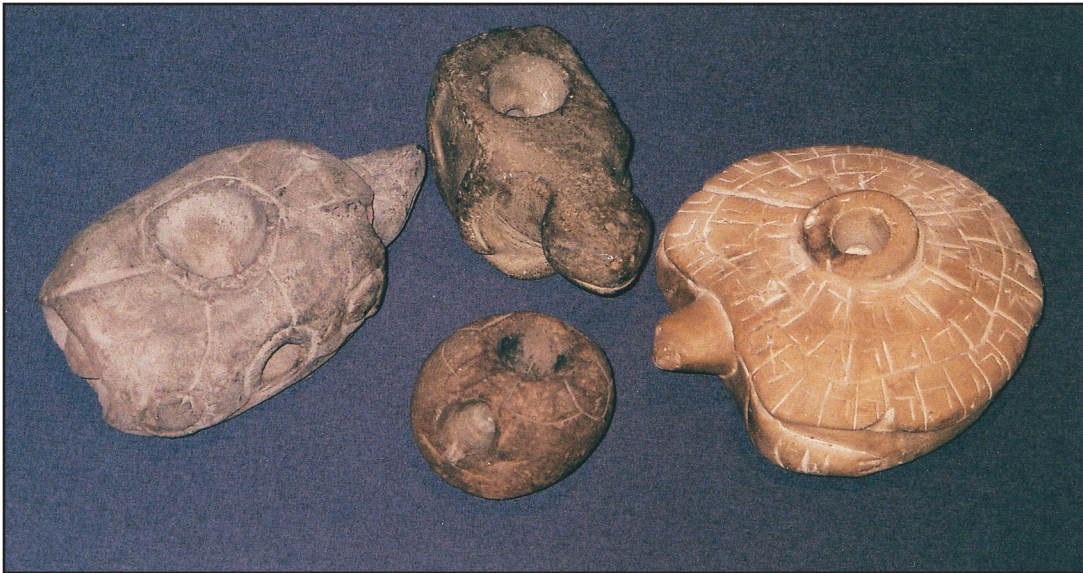


Figure 1 (Gehlbach) Four turtle pipes from, Knox Co., OH., Polk Co., MO. and Scioto Co., OH.

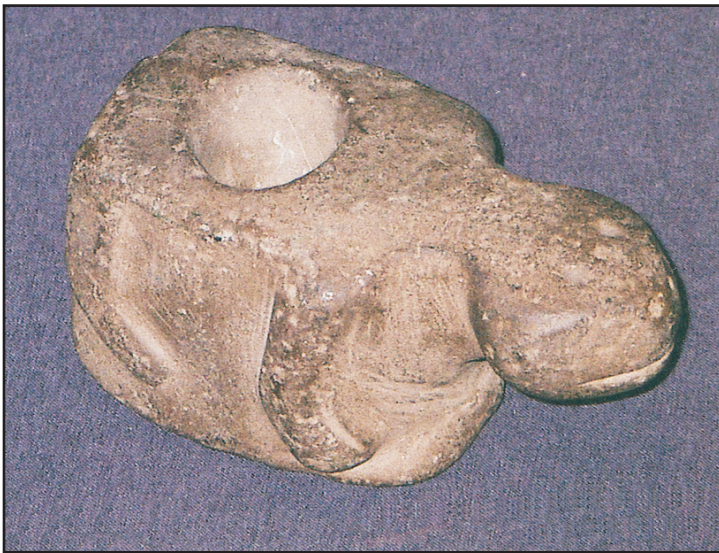


Figure 2 (Gehlbach) Sandstone standing turtle effigy pipe, Knox Co., OH.



Figure 3 (Gehlbach) Limestone turtle effigy pipe, Polk Co., MO.



Figure 4 (Gehlbach) Sandstone turtle effigy pipe, Scioto Co., OH.